

Chemistry 321  
The Sustainable World

UNIT 1: What is sustainability?

*Martin A. Walker, SUNY Potsdam*

# A. An Introduction to Sustainability

# The old view: A world without limits

- The traditional view is that the world is so vast that it is in effect infinite.
- Pollution can be dumped in rivers & oceans- it will disperse.
- Resources (ores, coal, oil) will never run out.

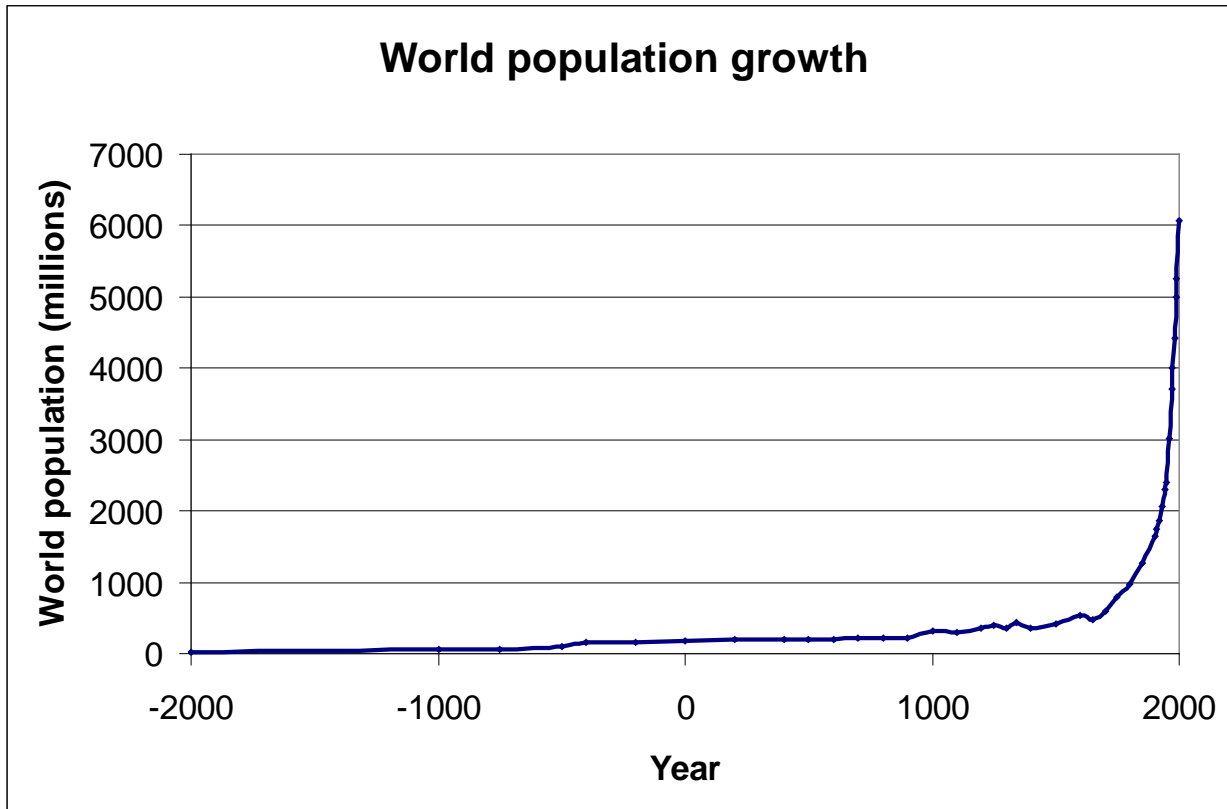


# The old view: “Dilution is the solution to pollution”

- In an “infinite world,” all we need to do is to get our waste to the oceans or into the air, and it will be dispersed completely....



# The old view: limitless resources



When the world population was very low, it seemed that resources, other than food, were limitless. If you ran out of wood in one forest, you could just go to the next!

# The old view: Industrial power = political strength



- *“The smoke of chimneys is the breath of Soviet Russia”*

But after World War II, a new world view began to emerge.

Silent Spring by Rachel Carson

Minamata Disease

*Flower power!*

The environmental movement

ppm ppb

Love Canal

Toxicology

Spectroscopy

US EPA

# What tells us we live in a finite world?

- Global warming
- Depletion of the ozone layer
- Acid rain
- Toxic materials in the environment
- And pictures like this...!





# The new world view

- **Sustainability**

We must try not to consume more than the Earth can produce and replace.

- **Responsibility**

We need to ensure that the environment is safe and healthy – now and in the future.

We must work to prevent global warming, acid rain, etc.

- **The solution is global, not national**

We need global solutions to global problems, we can't just export our pollution!

# Sustainability



- Implies a balance (or near balance) between consumption of resources and growth of new resources.
- “Sustainable is not the same as “renewable.”

## RESOURCES

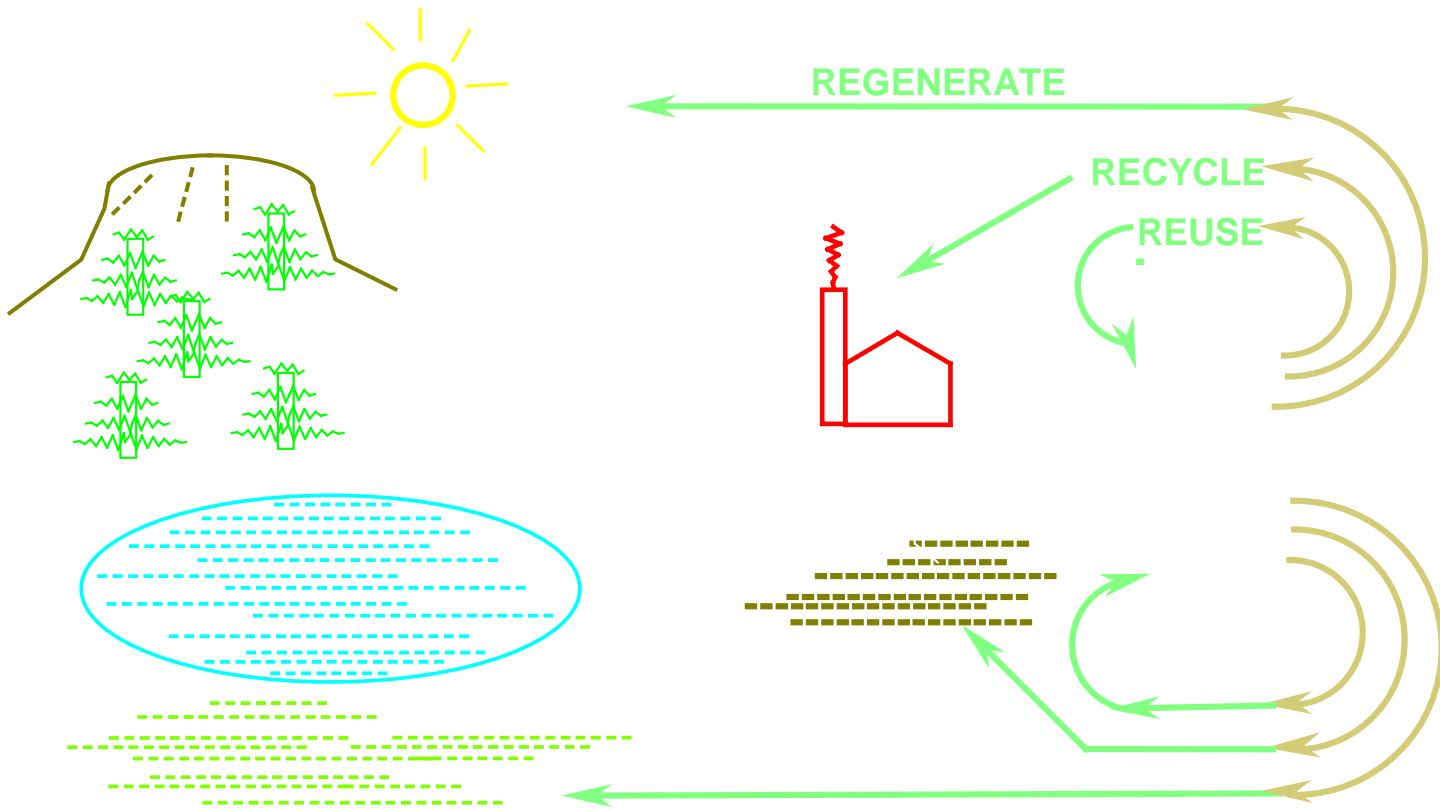
Oil & coal  
Other minerals  
Air & water  
Food

## CONSUMPTION

Energy, plastics  
Other materials  
Healthy life  
Healthy life

*If we consume more than we can produce, the future looks bleak!*

# Renewable resources



**Resources that can be replenished as rapidly as they are consumed. Often this involves natural processes, for example wood as an energy source.**

# Renewable resources

*World energy consumption is now seven times what it was when I was born (in 1960).\**

QUESTION: Do you think we could we switch to wood & biomass for *all* our present energy needs?

(Answer on next slide)

\* *M. Wackernagel, Ecological Footprint Accounting, Springer 2006*



# Renewable resources

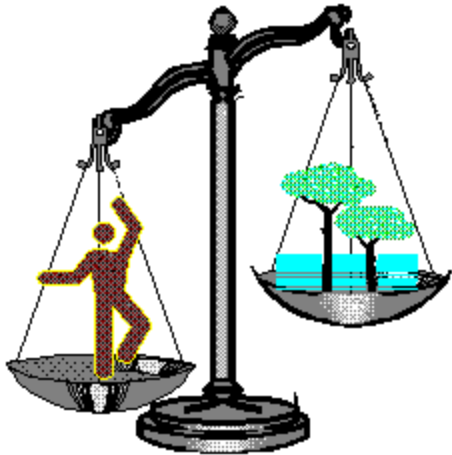
QUESTION: Could we switch to wood & biomass for *all* our present energy needs?

ANSWER: **No**. The rate of world energy consumption is currently close to 30 TW. The total conversion of solar energy via photosynthesis is around 130 W. Thus we would have to be burning all of the world's plant life over 4-5 years to meet our fuel energy needs, with nothing left for other wildlife or for food. Biomass is renewable, but biomass alone is *not* a sustainable energy supply.



Photo by John  
McColgan,  
USDA.  
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# The earth's carrying capacity



- May refer to the population that a given ecology can support over the long term.
- Alternatively defined as the earth's ability to provide required inputs and outputs as well as assimilate the waste outputs for a given population.

# Natural capital

- Those features of nature, such as minerals, fuels, energy, biological yield, or pollution absorption capacity, that are utilized or potentially utilizable in human social and economic systems.



A scene from Sierra Leone.  
Picture by Lindsay Stark,  
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# Paul Ehrlich's view



Picture credited to Paul Ehrlich, [from WM Commons](#)  
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- *To put this in context, you must remember that estimates of the long-term **carrying capacity** of Earth with relatively optimistic assumptions about consumption, technologies, and equity ( $A \times T$ ), are in the vicinity of two billion people.*
- -- [Paul Ehrlich \(Sept. 25, 1998\)](#)



# Paul Ehrlich's view (contd.)

- *Today's population cannot be sustained on the 'interest' generated by natural ecosystems, but is consuming its vast supply of **natural capital** -- especially deep, rich agricultural soils, 'fossil' groundwater, and biodiversity -- accumulated over centuries to eons. In some places soils, which are generated on a time scale of centimeters per century are disappearing at rates of centimeters per year. Some aquifers are being depleted at dozens of times their recharge rates, and we have embarked on the greatest extinction episode in 65 million years. -- [Paul Ehrlich \(Sept. 25, 1998\)](#)*



Deforestation in Tanzania  
Picture [from WM Commons](#)  
by Mohsin S. Karmali  
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# Mathis Wackernagel's view

“In 2002, humanity operated in a state of overshoot, demanding over 20% more biological capacity than the Earth's ecosystems could regenerate in that year. Using the Ecological Footprint as an accounting tool, we propose and discuss three possible global scenarios for the future of human demand and ecosystem supply. Bringing humanity out of overshoot and onto a potentially sustainable path will require managing the consumption of food, fibre and energy, and maintaining or increasing the productivity of natural and agricultural ecosystems.”

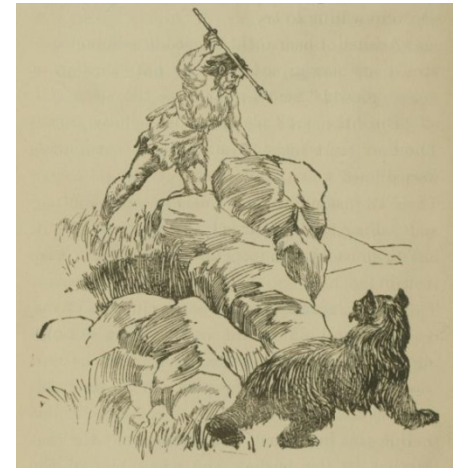
Justin Kitzes, Mathis Wackernagel, et al., in “Shrink and share: humanity's present and future Ecological Footprint,”  
*Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 12 2008 v363 pp467-475



Mathis Wackernagel,  
President of the Global  
Footprint Network.  
Photo by [Friends of Europe](#)  
Flickr, [CC license](#)

# Is it the end of civilization?

- Solution #1- go back to the Stone Age or become ascetics:
  - not politically realistic for society as a whole.
- Solution #2- raise environmental awareness, improve efficiency and equitability in use of energy & materials, reduce consumption, move towards sustainability:
  - the only solution in the long term that avoids destruction
  - but what do we do in the short term?



Picture [by](#)  
[Margaret A. McIntyre](#)  
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This course will focus on solution #2 - what needs to be done, why and how, to the best of our current knowledge.

# Sustainable development

- “Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”
  - *The [Brundtland Report](#), 1987.*
- Adopted by the UN after the Rio summit (1992)





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**DISCUSSION POINT:  
IS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REALISTIC?**

# Key dates

- 1987: “[Our Common Future](#)” (the Brundtland Report) advocates sustainable development
- 1992: Rio “[Earth Summit](#)”- UN conference. By 1994, govts. around the world sign on to support sustainable development.
- 1997: [Kyoto protocol](#)
- 2002: [World Summit for Sustainable Development](#) in Johannesburg.
- 2007: [Bali Summit on Climate Change](#)
- 2009: Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change

# United Nations response



- “[Agenda 21](#)” is a 1992 UN policy statement adopted as a result of the Rio summit.
- The UN “[Commission on Sustainable Development](#)” was established in 1992. It monitors progress and organizes conferences.

# Rio Summit 2012



- See [www.uncsd2012.org/](http://www.uncsd2012.org/)
- Widely [considered to be a failure](#) – poor leadership, and too much focus on development, but little support for the environment.
- UN Chief Ban Ki-Moon had submitted a proposal titled [“Sustainable Energy for All”](#), but this was merely “noted” rather than embraced as policy.



# Government response (US)



Picture by Pete Souza / [Notwist](#)  
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- "Each of us has a part to play in a new future that will benefit all of us. As we recover from this recession, the transition to clean energy has the potential to grow our economy and create millions of jobs -- but only if we accelerate that transition."

[President Obama, June 15, 2010](#)

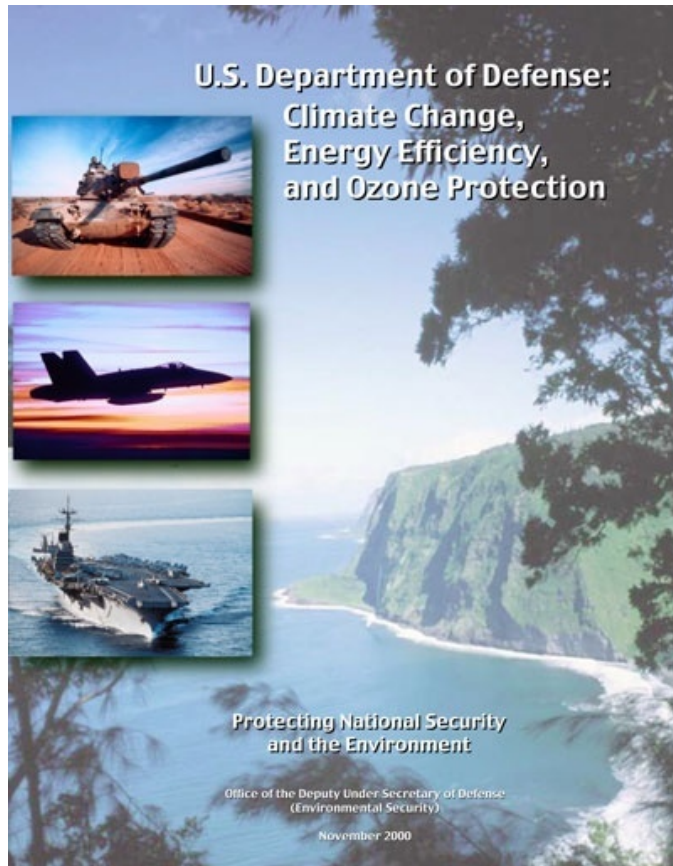
- For the first time, the U.S. will [catalogue greenhouse gas emissions](#) from large emission sources
- Federal agencies [now committed](#) to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2020.

# Government response (US)



- *We must lead the world to produce fewer greenhouse gas emissions, and we must do it in a way that does not undermine economic growth or prevent nations from delivering greater prosperity for their people. We know this can be done. Last year America grew our economy while also reducing greenhouse gases."*
- [President George W. Bush, September 28, 2007](#)

# Government response (US)



- The US Department of Defense is not taking chances. They need to consider “worst case scenarios” such as the wars triggered by climate change envisaged in their [2004 report](#). Under Clinton, they pledged to [reduce greenhouse gas emissions](#) by the military, without compromising national security. They even looked at [hybrid Humvees!](#)

# Government response (Japan)



Former Japanese  
PM Yasuo Fukuda

- "Global environmental problems could threaten the very foundation of human existence and must be dealt with immediately through the mutual cooperation of countries around the world. Developed countries should take the initiative in addressing the .....

From Japan's "[National Action Plan for Agenda 21](#)"



Tokyo Governor  
Shintarō Ishihara

- "Tokyo has stolen a march on the national Japanese government by introducing the country's first mandatory carbon trading scheme as part of new environmental regulations that will force thousands of businesses to cut their greenhouse gas emissions..... the capital's most energy-hungry office buildings, factories and universities must cut emissions by between 6 and 8% over the next five years. Those that fail to do so will have to buy pollution credits..."
- [Financial Times, April 7 2010](#)

# Government response (Japan)

Under the Kyoto protocol, Japan is committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions to 6% below 1990 emissions. As of 2011, they have in fact [increased by 3.7%](#) since 1990, though this does not include any offset for reforestation (estimated to equate to a -4.0% effect).

Recently elected PM Shinzō Abe has not made any major environmental policy statements as yet. However, solar power has traditionally been heavily promoted by the Japanese government. According to the New York Times in 2012:

- “Japan is poised to overtake Italy and become the world’s second-biggest market for [solar power](#), as incentives starting July 1 propel sales. It could eventually top Germany, which holds the No. 1 spot.”



Japanese PM  
Shinzō Abe  
[Picture](#) in  
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# Government response (China)



Wen Jiabao  
Former Chinese  
premier

- “China has formulated and implemented a national plan for coping with climate change, and adopted a series of policies and measures in this regard. China combines the handling of climate change with its execution of its sustainable development strategy, acceleration of building a resource-conserving and environmental-friendly society and construction of a country of innovation.”

From 2008 white paper:

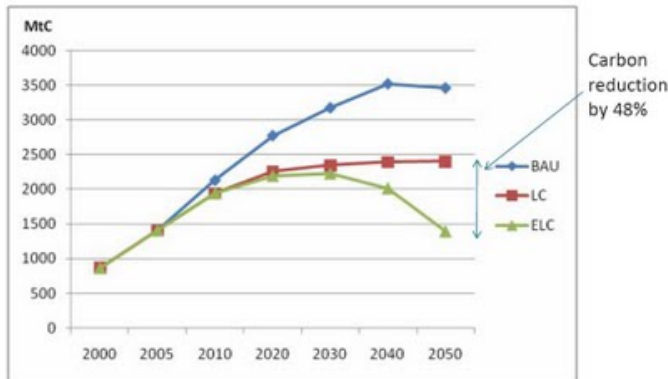
[China's policies and actions on climate change](#)

# Government response (China)

## 12th Five-year Plan on Greenhouse Emission Control (2012):

- "By 2015, carbon dioxide emission per-unit GDP would be reduced by 17 percent and energy consumption per-unit GDP by 16 percent as compared with that in 2010; the proportion of consumption of non-fossil energy to the consumption of primary energy would be increased to 11.4 percent; and the acreage of new forests would increase by 12.5 million ha, with the forest coverage rate raised to 21.66 percent and the forest growing stock increased by 600 million cu m. This fully demonstrates Chinese government's determination to promote low-carbon development and address climate change."

Low carbon scenarios:  
Carbon emission



[Graph from nextbigfuture.com](http://nextbigfuture.com)

# Government response (Germany)



Angela Merkel,  
German Chancellor.  
Credit: "Photo  
European Parliament"  
Read her [1998 essay  
on sustainability](#). Merkel  
has a chemistry PhD.

- In 1994 the German Bundestag amended the Basic Law, the *de facto* constitution of Germany. It states that being aware of the Federal State's "*responsibility toward future generations, it shall protect the natural basis of life*" whenever a state organ takes up action. .
- In 2000, the German government formed the National Council on Sustainability (the [Nachhaltigkeitsrat](#)), to create a national sustainability strategy.
- On 17 April 2002 the Federal cabinet passed the German [Strategy for Sustainable Development](#). This is based on the idea that "The model of sustainable development is the leitmotif which will guide us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century." The strategy is "for devising a form of development which is economically, ecologically and socially sustainable."



# Government response (UK)



David Cameron  
British PM

- On February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the UK government published its environmental proposals in “[Mainstreaming Sustainable Development](#)”: “Our long term economic growth relies on protecting and enhancing the environmental resources that underpin it, and paying due regard to social needs. As part of our commitment to enhance wellbeing, we will start measuring our progress as a country, not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life..” [See more...](#)
- The UK is committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80% by 2050, relative to 1990 levels. We need a transformation of the UK economy while ensuring secure, low carbon energy supplies to 2050.  
<http://www.decc.gov.uk/>
- The London Array, the world’s largest offshore windfarm, was [opened on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013, by Cameron](#). It will provide enough energy to power almost half a million homes.



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**DISCUSSION POINT:  
WHAT SHOULD *OUR* GOVERNMENT BE  
DOING?**

**WHAT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
MEANS  
IN PRACTICE**

# Sustainable development

- We don't need to return to the Stone Age, and maybe we even keep our cars, though they may be smaller and use fuel cells.
- We must consider the environmental impact of all technology and new development, and aim for minimal impact.
- Use science & technology as a solution to current problems.
- Must also be viable in economic terms.

# A sustainable economy

- “Rates of use of renewable resources do not exceed regeneration rates.
- Rates of use of non-renewable resources do not exceed rates of development of renewable substitutes.
- Rates of pollution emission do not exceed assimilative capacities of the environment.”
  - Daly, H. *Beyond Growth*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1996.



A biodiesel refinery  
In Germany

*Image under GNU,  
by Wolfgang Priwo,  
[Wikimedia Commons](#)*

# A sustainable society

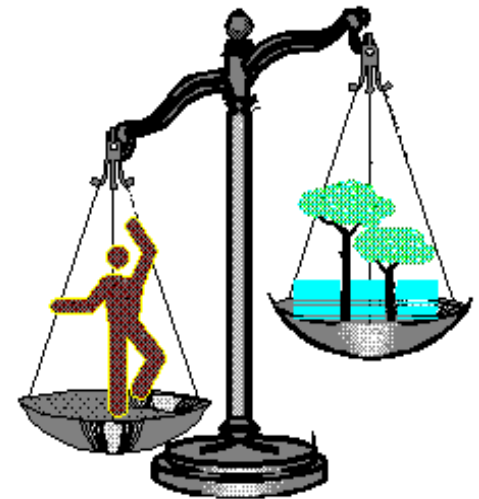
- We need to set realistic yet desirable goals for society:
  - Permanent prosperity, with constraints of the real world
  - This prosperity distributed fairly and equitably to all of humanity, to other species, and to future generations.

# Principles of ecosystem sustainability

- The necessary conditions for processes in an ecosystem must be maintained.
- Operation must be within the carrying capacity of the ecosystem.
- Harvesting rates should not exceed the regeneration rate.
- Waste emissions should not exceed the assimilative capacity.
- The rate of exploitation of non-renewable resources should be equal to or less than the rate of development of renewable substitutes.

# Factors affecting the sustainability balance

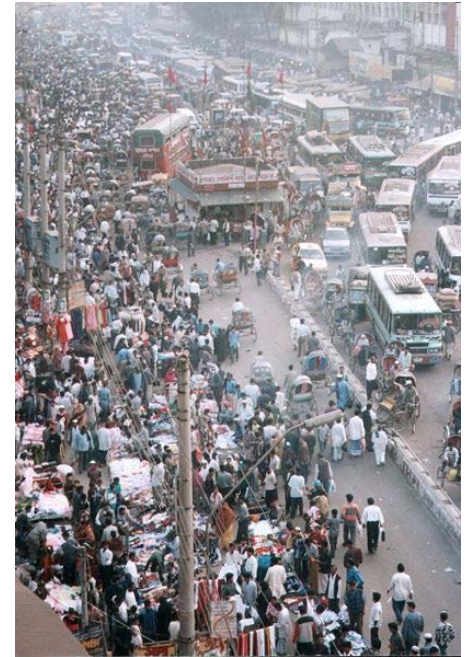
- Population
- Consumption of resources per capita, based on
  - Wealth
  - Efficiency of resource utilization
- Intellectual capital
- Natural capital
- Food/water production and land use
- Human organization
- Waste





# Population

- By 1999, world population exceeded 6 billion. Expected to pass 7 billion by 2012.
- Improving sanitation & medicine have led to falling death rates
- However, increasing urbanization and affluence tends to cause lower birth rates.
- Improvements in agricultural productivity have allowed the world to support a much higher population than hitherto possible.
- A [major study](#) in 2012 concluded that we must restrain population and consumption if we are to avoid disaster.



Dhaka street crowds

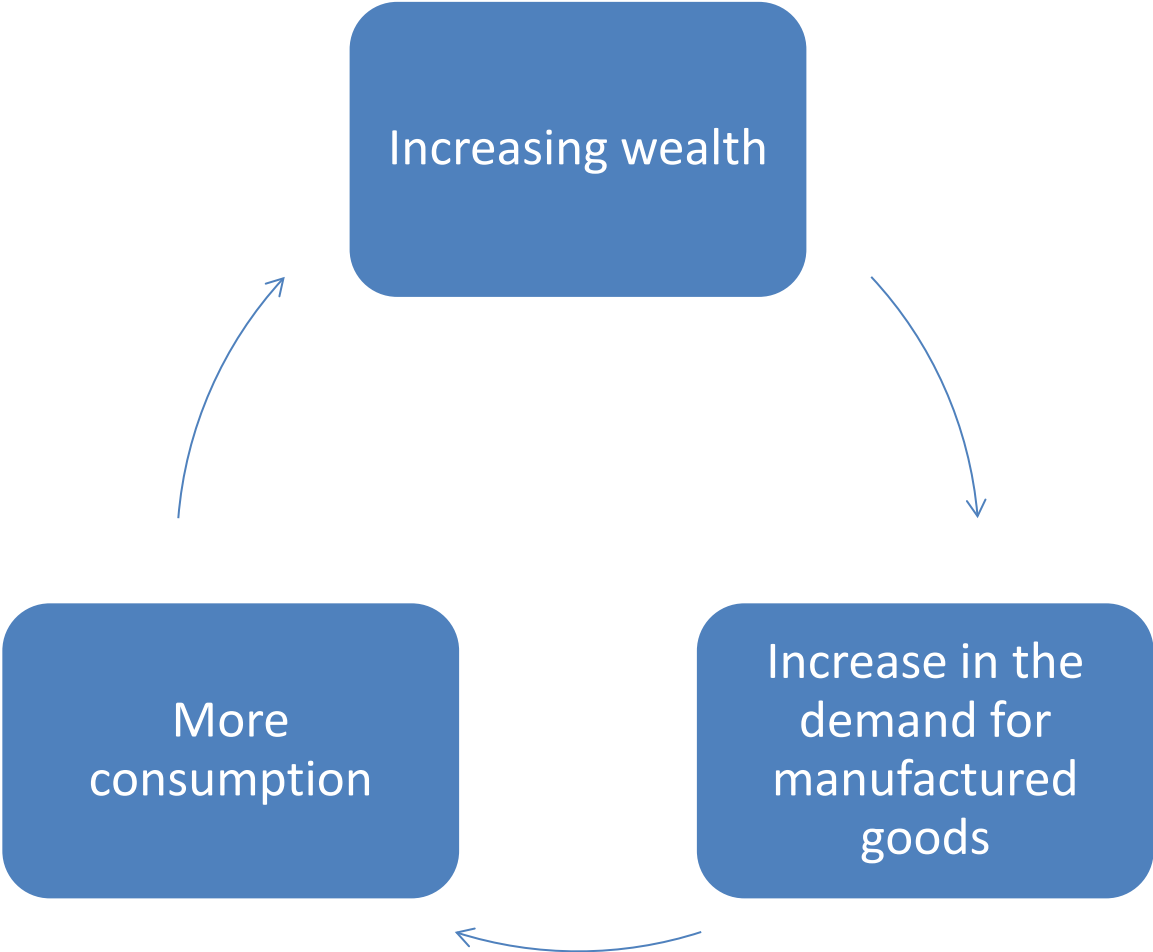
*Image under CC,  
by Ahron de Leeuw  
From [Flickr](#)*

# Per capita consumption

- Two main categories- materials and energy.
- Materials in a sustainable economy must either be renewable (e.g., wood) or extremely plentiful (e.g, magnesium chloride in seawater).
- Energy sources may be based on material fuels (oil, gas, uranium, etc.) or on natural phenomena (solar radiation, wind power, tidal power, etc.)

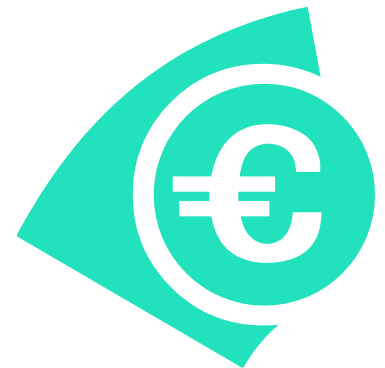


# Wealth



# Wealth

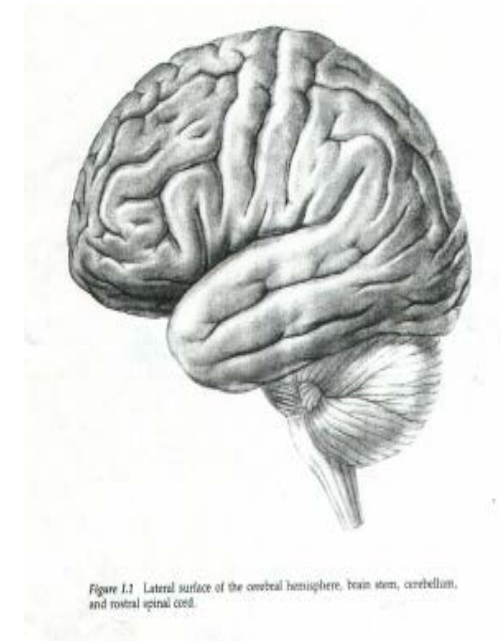
- Fortunately science & technology have allowed goods to be manufactured more efficiently, using fewer resources.
- On balance, per capita consumption of resources has risen as wealth has increased.



# Intellectual capital

Two sources of intellectual capital in an organization- *human capital* and *organizational capital*.

- *Human capital* = knowledge & ability.
- *Organizational capital* = hardware, software, technology, management methods.
- An increase in intellectual capital leads to a more efficient use of resources and reduces waste.



# Natural capital

- Those features of nature, such as minerals, fuels, energy, biological yield, or pollution absorption capacity, that are utilized or potentially utilizable in human social and economic systems.
- This **must be maintained** in a sustainable economy.



Coral reef. [Picture](#) by USFWS, CC license



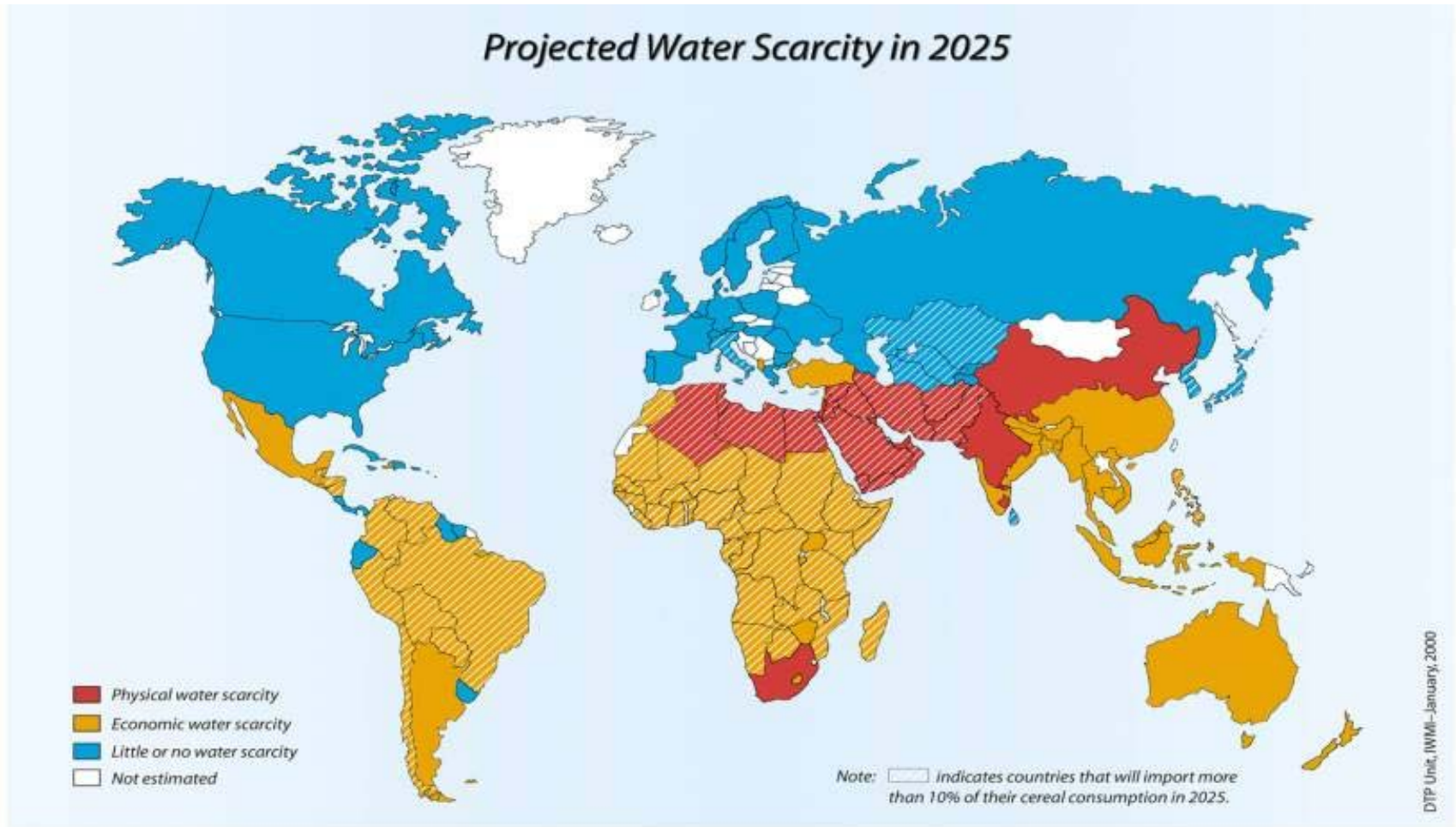
Picture by my wife at Lochinch Castle Estates, on our vacation! Scotland, June 2012 CC-license

# Food/water & land use

- Increasing population & wealth lead to increasing demand for food and water, and also land.
- The amount of land used for agriculture depends on climate, fertility, human occupation and type of agriculture.
- Fertile soil is being lost due to overuse & erosion (30% since 1960).
- Water is needed both for human consumption and by agriculture.
- Some predict severe land/water shortages.



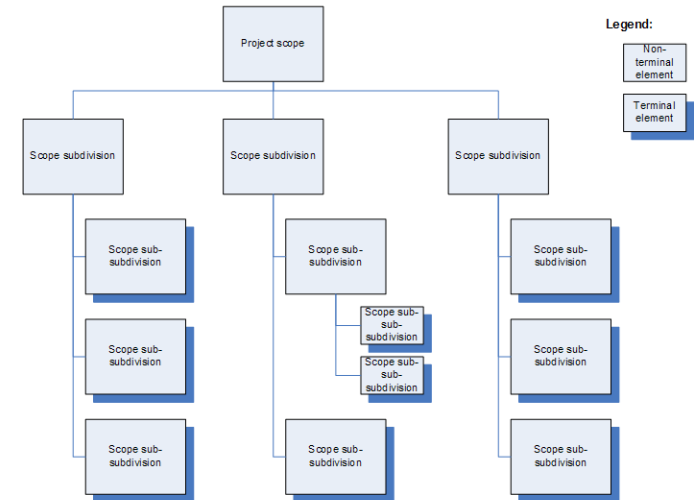
# Water is running out...





# Human organization

- Different political & economic systems will affect the balance in different ways.
- Within a business, a company that considers sustainability a priority is likely to have a much lower impact on ecosystem.
- If science & technology are focused on the environment, great improvements may be made.



GNU license, [diagram by Mkoval](#)

# Waste



- When waste is large-scale or highly toxic, it may exceed the assimilative capacity of the ecosystem (global and/or local).
- “Waste Reduction at Source” (WRAS) or Pollution Prevention (P2) can have a huge impact on reducing waste, *and* make the process more efficient.



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**DISCUSSION POINT:  
WHICH IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE? WHAT  
ARE WE MISSING?**

End